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ABSTRACT

When poetry is approached as merely a type of literary expression--as words arranged in an unusual way, designed to confuse and baffle both teachers and students--the results are inevitable: confusion, feelings of ignorance, resentment. Poetry is not just a kind of literary expression but is and has always been a celebration, an actively shared human experience; a creative link between language and life. Yet in today's high school classroom, poetry is just convoluted written language that seems incomprehensible. For students to understand poetry, they must first learn to appreciate it. One way to help students appreciate poetry is to perform a poem such as Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in class with sound effects and expression. In this way, by the end of the period the students will have memorized the poem before even having seen it in print. A good follow-up exercise is to give them a copy of "Jabberwocky," have them (in small groups) substitute real words for the nonsense words in the poem, and let each group perform (not read) its own version. Once the students have grasped the fun of poetry, the teacher can turn to more serious poems that can still be acted out. Finally, students can be turned loose in small groups to decide which poems they want to learn, memorize, and perform for the class. Another small group activity that works well incorporates music with poetry by allowing the students to make up music for the poem. A good individual activity combines pictorial art and poetry by having students write poems for specific paintings. (PRA)

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INTEGRATING THE ARTS INTO THE STUDY OF POETRY:

WHY AND HOW

written by Robin Grosshuesch

teacher

Poetry.

This simple little word is capable of striking terror into the hearts of millions. Teachers in high schools across the country dread the inevitable day when the word "poetry" must be spoken. Normally docile, agreeable students become hostile, defensive, deadly opponents at the utterance of this horrific word. For this poor, stricken multitude, poetry has become a source of boredom, frustration, anger and rebellion. It has led to a feeling of inadequacy, of mental poverty. It is approached with trepidation, an uncontrollable trembling of the limbs and the vocal chords.

But why? What power lurks in this word, that it is capable of reducing an intelligent human being to a quivering mass of doubts and fears? Why is the sadistic torture associated with this word forced upon these unwilling masses year after year - like some ancient, vengeful god requiring retribution? What is the power of this frightening word? This simple little word. Poetry.

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For thousands of years, poetry has been an integral part of human life on this planet. The ancient Egyptians as long ago as 2600 B.C. had hieroglyphic inscriptions of poetry similar to the forms of today's

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odes and hymns. They had rhythmic poems that were probably chanted, the words indicating that these poems accompanied work and play. The poetry of the ancient Sumerians, Hittites, and Hebrews was largely religious in nature. Their poems were very rhythmic and were probably sung or chanted. There is also evidence that these poems were accompanied by dancing. The early Greeks wrote epics and narrative songs to tell of their heroes and heroines, their myths of creation and of gods and goddesses. The Greeks also produced dramatic poetry which was performed in outdoor arenas for large and appreciative audiences. Ancient Japanese and Chinese poetry was a very special, expressive art form - a simple, emotional celebration of nature and life. The poetry of the American Indians was chanted and danced. The words of their rhythmic poems expressed the needs and desires of their lives - to smooth the passage of the soul after death, to assure the outcome of a hunt or battle, to plead with Nature. For all of these ancient cultures and many more, throughout history and from all parts of this globe, poetry has been a necessary sustenance for the soul, as vital as food for the body.

Why then the scenario (depicted fairly accurately, though somewhat exaggeratedly) of the high school classroom of today, when poetry must be approached and dealt with? If poetry has been for millions of people through thousands of years a vital form of sustenance, why is it now considered a form of torture? The answer to this question lies in the manner in which poetry is approached and dealt with in today's classroom.

Poetry is a type of literary expression. Therefore, it is included as one section of all literature texts for high school students. It is taught as a "type of literary expression" - words arranged in a rather unusual way, designed to confuse and baffle both teachers and students. When poetry is approached in this manner alone, the results are inevitable - confusion, feelings of ignorance, resentment. Everyone either wallows heavily through or blocks it out, and breathes a sigh of relief when the poetry unit is finally finished - until next year. If poetry is approached only as a type of literary expression, not only do we lose students, but we lose nearly five thousand years of our world's history.

Poetry is not just a kind of literary expression. It is entirely unique. Its uniqueness is found in its rhythmic sound and the imagery of its language. Its uniqueness is found in its origins and associations. For nearly five thousand years, poetry has been an oral tradition, a celebration, an actively shared human experience. Poetry has been the creative link between language and life - through words, music, art, dance, and theater. Poetry has been much more than language - poetry has been an art.

In today's high school classroom, poetry is no longer an art. It is just written language - convoluted language that seems incomprehensible. This poetry has been reduced to printed words. Its origins, its associations, its art, its life are gone. It is little wonder that this poetry is tedious, at best.

So how do we bring back what has been lost? How do we restore

poetry to its former glory? How do we make it once again an art? A vital force? An actively shared human experience? An experience that teachers and students will relish and never again wish to relinquish?

Impossible? No. This is no Herculean task. Accomplishing this restoration simply requires a change in the teacher's approach to poetry. It is commonly thought that students cannot appreciate poetry until they understand it. Therefore, teachers approach poetry by analyzing its meaning, word by word, until most students are so bored or confused that they could not care less about what it all means. Appreciation is hardly the end result. I believe that poetry cannot be understood until it is appreciated. This is a simple reversal of common thought, but a tremendous difference in the approach to poetry. So how does it work? How do you get students to appreciate poetry before they understand it? Here are some ideas.

On the first day of a poetry unit, before letting the students see a poem in print, before even mentioning the word <u>poem</u>, have an active, fun poem memorized yourself - I'll use Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" as an example. Tell the students that they're going to do something different that day, and ask them to move their chairs into a big circle. They will already be curious and active. Have them sit down and close their eyes. Tell them to imagine that they are no longer in the classroom. They have been transported through time to an ancient, dark forest. Describe the forest and its inhabitants: the Tumtum tree, the young hero with vorpal sword, the wise old man, the curious crea-

tures, and the loathsome Jabberwock. Tell the students that they themselves are the inhabitants of this forest. Name the characters again and ask the students to raise their hands when their character's name is given. From the raised hands, choose one student for each part in the poem. Let the students open their eyes. Consult with them briefly about the part each is to play, being sure there is something for all the students to do. In this poem, the students sitting down can make jungle noises, make the sound of the vorpal sword, etc. Begin performing the poem, with lots of expression, and lead the students through the action, making sure the seated students come in at the right time with their sound effects. The poem performance will be rough because it is totally unrehearsed, but that will only add to the fun.

Every time I have done this with a class or seen it done, the result has been sheer hilarity and pleasure - and a demand to do it again. If repeated performances of "Jabberwocky" is all you do the first class period, that's just fine. By the end of the period, your students will have had a wonderful time with a poem, most of them will have the poem completely memorized - and they will not have even seen the poem in print. It will not bother them a bit that much of the poem is nonsense words that they do not understand - appreciation before understanding.

A good follow-up exercise that students will enjoy is to give them a copy of "Jabberwocky" and have them substitute real words for the nonsense words in the poem. This is best done in small groups of three

or four students, so they can share ideas. Then let each group perform (not read) its own version of "Jabberwocky," each member of the group taking a part. There will be a satisfying group feeling of creation and active participation that a traditional study of poetry rarely fosters.

Once you have the students' appreciation of the fun of poetry by doing something like "Jabberwocky," turn to slightly more serious poems that can still be easily acted out (i.e., Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Dawn" or Carl Sandburg's "Fog"). Again, start with the whole class as a group, taking volunteer performers to work with you. Then divide the students into small groups and let each group decide how they would perform it. Choose short poems that can be easily memorized.

After you have followed this procedure just a few times, you can turn the students loose with poetry. Give each small group a collection of poems - give one group a book of Emily Dickinson, another Gwendolyn Brooks, another e. e. cummings, etc. Let the students peruse these collections together and find poems that <u>they</u> want to learn, memorize, and perform for the class. You will never once have to ask what a poem means or what it is about. The students will ask each other and you. In order to act out the poem, the students will <u>have</u> to know what it is about - they will <u>want</u> to understand it. The initial appreciation that you have created becomes a desire, a <u>need</u>, to understand. Before each group's performance of a poem, be sure they give the name and author of the poem. Follow up each performance with a brief question

and answer period - the questions will be asked by the audience and the answers will be given by the performers. The students will be learning poetry from each other, with your guidance.

Another small group activity that works well incorporates music with poetry. Have each group choose a poem that they think would make a good song. Have them make up appropriate music for the poem. For example, one group might make up a fast, sing-songy tune for Saxe's "The Blind Men and the Elephant," and another group might make up a slow, rolling cadence for Dunbar's beautiful "Sympathy." Students love music, and when they work together in small groups they are not the least bit intimidated by the idea of making up melodies. Let the students sing their new songs for the class - the results can be quite humorous and often very moving.

Music can be used quite successfully as an individual activity as well. Bring in a tape of very melodic classical music - Mozart works well. Play it as background music frequently so students get used to it. Then one day, have them really listen directly to the melodies in the piece. Have them write lyrics for a melody, in the form of a rhyming poem, so they can create a "Mozart song." They will enjoy sharing these with each other.

Another good individual activity involves art and poetry. Go to your local public library and check out prints of famous paintings, being sure that several different styles, subjects, and moods are represented. Put them up around the room and let the students have a

few days to look at them and talk about them. Then have each student, as a silent individual activity, write the name of each painting and next to it write the kind of poem that would be most appropriate for that painting (i.e., a Japanese landscape - Haiku poem). Let them choose one painting and write a poem for it. Or you choose the form of the poem - Haiku and Cinquain are best because they are short but require a thoughtful, concise use of words - and have the students write a poem for each painting. Let them read their poems to the class and discuss mood and expression. You might also let them make a book of poetry written by the class, a collection of art and music poems that will provide a permanent record of their achievements - a wonderful memory of an exciting and fulfilling classroom experience.

These are just a few ideas for approaching poetry in the classroom. They are ideas that work. I believe they work because they bring back what has been sadly lost. They return poetry to its true form, its vital role in history and life. Once again poetry is part of an oral tradition. It is a celebration, an actively shared human experience. Once again poetry has found its place as an art - the creative link between language and life.